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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine if preservice teachers hold different preferences for college-course learning activities at four levels of professional training. Subjects of the study were 549 students, ranging from freshmen through seniors in their undergraduate teacher preparation program. The Learning Preference Questionnaire asked the students to express their preference for course learning activities in six areas: (1) "in-class" learning activity area, concerning instructor-student behavior; (2) "out-of-class" activities, asking for preferences on such activities as library research and field trips; (3) "course examination," which asked about the types and number of examinations; (4) "course and instructor organization," asking about class schedules and instructors' planning and use of time; (5) "rapport," dealing with the importance of feelings between students and instructor; and (6) "grading systems," based on a fixed or group standard. An analysis of results offers insights into different levels in students' learning styles and suggests a way of improving the structure of college courses. (JD)

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A Cross Sectional Study of Preservice Teacher Preferences for College course Learning Activities

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The purpose of this research was to determine if preservice teachers hold different preferences for college course learning activities at four levels of professional training. Previous research has been concentrated on two broad concepts, learning preferences related to cognitive processes and instructional methods and activities. Gage and Berliner (1984) make a clear distinction between style and method in classroom teaching where style is illustrated by the teacher's movement about the room, gestures, tone and volume of voice, and degree of enthusiasm. Method refers to formal, self-conscious aspects of teaching and is concerned with the kinds of learning activities that take place. In this study, preferences for learning activities was used rather than learning styles because preservice teachers and their instructors have had many years of experience with such concepts as lecturing, independent study, and library research and these instructional activities are easier to control and change than cognitive styles since instructional activities are under the direct influence of the instructor and students. If differences are found in preferences for course learning activities as students progress through four years of undergraduate teacher peparation, then college instructors can use this information to plan and present courses that will enhance student interest and motivation and increase learning effectiveness.

Ristow and Edeburn (1983) surveyed 115 sophomore/junior level preservice teachers in Educational Psychology classes at South Dakota State University on their instructional preferences using the Renzuli-Smith Learning Style Inventory. The five instructional methods receiving the highest percentage of favorable responses were: lecture (72%), teaching games (68%), programmed instruction (67%), peer teaching (65.5%), and discussion (60.9%). The three methods reserving the lowest percentage of favorable responses were: independent study (24.5%), simulations (21.8%) and drill and recitation

(19.1%). They replicated their study in 1984 with 150 sophomore/juniors and found the lecture (71.9%), discussion (68.6%), peer teaching and teaching games both (60.1%) to be most preferred. Only programmed instruction, which declined from 67% to 26% favorable attitudes, changed among the first five preferred methods in 1983. They found the three least preferred methods, all with 20.3% unfavorable attitudes were independent study, drill and recitation and projects. Pascal (1971) studied the effects of offering lecture, lecture with discussion and independent study to 185 undergraduate students in a Psychology course called "Socialization". He found that having the preferred instructional option did not lead to higher course grades or rating the course as more valuable, but did find that learning preference was related to a more positive attitude toward Psychology. He also found students in the preferred lecture and lecture/discussion courses performed better on measures of knowledge and comprehension of course material. No differences were found relative to the application of course material, but independent reading students performed better on evaluating a novel reading assignment.

Smith (1976) researched teaching method preference by developing a 54-item instrument that measured nine different instructional strategies: (1) projects, (2) drill and recitation, (3) peer teaching, (4) discussion, (5) teaching games, (6) independent study, (7) programmed instruction, (8) lecture, and (9) simulation. She then used the instrument in an experiement with young adolescents who were matched in instructional preference for lecture, discussion and simulation. She found that the teaching method preference correlated .38 with achievement and .23 with motivation. Smith concluded students differ in their preference for teaching modalities and that teaching method matching can significantly enhance educational outcomes.

Methods

Subjects in the present study were enrolled in the undergraduate teacher preparation program at Miami University where there are 1540 full time and 79 part time students, for a total of 1619. A cross sectional method of data collection was used with a total sample of 549. There were 120 freshmen, 165 sophomores, 164 juniors, and 100 seniors, all enrolled in appropriate teacher education courses during the second semester of the academic year when data were collected. The Learning Preference Questionnaire (LPQ), developed by the author, has 37 Likert-type items that ask students to express their preference for course learning activities by using a five point scale where 1 was most effective and 5 most ineffective. The items were organized into six areas of learning activities and are presented below with brief definitions of each area, the number of items and alpha reliability coefficients. The "In-Class" learning activity area concerns instructor-student behavior in the classroom and has 14 items with a reliability of .63. The second area, "Out-Of-Class" activities, asked for preferences on such activities as library research and field trips, has seven items and a reliability of .48. The third area, "Course Examinations", asked about the types and number of examinations and has five items with a reliability of .13. The fourth area, "Course and Instructor Organization", has items about class schedules and intructors who are well prepared and who keep the course on track. This area has five items with a reliability of .71. The fifth area was "Rapport", which asked about the importance of feelings between students and instructor. It has four items and a reliability of .79. The sixth area concerned "Grading Systems" based on a fixed or group standard and has three items and a zero order reliability.

Results

The data was analyzed by using ANOVA and the Tukey Honestly Significant Differenct Test to compare each of the 37 items among the four levels of teacher preparation where the .05 level was used to reject the null hypothesis and by Discriminate Analysis to identify functions that could aid in describing and classifying learning preferences according to the four levels of teacher preparation.

Thirteen of the thirty-seven learning activities showed significantly different mean preferences among the four groups. The results are presented according to the six areas of course learning activities measured by the LPQ. Five of the 14 "In-Class" learning activities were found to significantly differentiate among the four groups. Seniors express the strongest negative attitude toward lectures while sophomores express the most positive preference. Seniors also express the highest positive attitude toward viewing films and video tapes while freshmen believe film and tape are less effective. Seniors and juniors believe answering instructors questions is less effective while freshmen favor this form of classroom learning. Juniors and sophomores hold more negative attitudes toward participating in review sessions in class while freshmen view this as an effective learning activity. No differences were found in such in-course learning activities as small group discussion, guest speakers, student panels, case studies, simulation, oral reports, role playing, asking questions, entire class discussions and practice quizzes.

The "Out-Of-Class" learning activities area has seven items and two items significantly differentiate among the four groups. Seniors feel using library resources to be a significantly more effective learning activity than freshmen. Seniors and juniors both viewed computer assisted instruction as more effective than freshmen and sophomores. No differences were found on such out of course activities as writing a term paper, taking field trips,

answering questions from a workbook, not attending class, but learning alone, and reading textbooks before class meetings.

The third area of course learning activities is related to "Examination Practices". There are four items in this area and two differences were found among the four groups. Seniors are significantly different from freshmen and sophomores in feeling that only mid-term and final examinations are effective learning activities. Freshmen feel having periodic quizzes is more effective while juniors are opposed to such an activity. No differences were found in preferences for essay type or true/false type examination questions.

The fourth area of the Learning Preference Questionnaire concerns "Instructor Organization" and no differences are found among the four groups. The five questions asked for preferences about keeping the class on schedule, the importance of a course syllabus, having well prepared instructors who keep the class on track, and information about grading practices.

The fifth area of the LPQ asks for preferences about instructor-student "Rapport" and had four questions where two differences are found. Seniors and juniors express a lower preference for instructors who were friendly and gave individual attention to students compared to freshmen. No significant differences are found on the effectiveness of instructors who encourage mutual respect.

The sixth area of the LPQ asked preservice teachers their preferences for "Course Grading Systems". Two of the three items are signigicantly different. Seniors feel that a fixed grading standard was ineffective while freshmen thought grading in relation to peers was ineffective. No differences are found on grading on the potential of each student. Preference for grading indicates freshmen favor a fixed standard while seniors prefer being graded in relation to peers.

Two discriminate functions significantly differentiate among the four groups. The first function is called "preference for structured instruction" and accounts for 62 percent of the variance between the four groups X^2 (114 N=522)=236.45 p <0000. The second function is called "concern for examinations" and accounts for 24 percent of the variance, X^2 (74 N=522)=94.30 p <.05. The two functions properly classify 53 percent of the freshmen, 38.9 percent of the sophomores, 45.6 percent of the juniors and 58.5 percent of the seniors. These two discriminate functions support the ANOVA findings among the four groups.

Discussion

In general, younger students, especially freshmen, prefer courses that are structured and lead by the instructor where frequent quizzes are given, review sessions are held, and specific instructor questions are answered and more than two examinations are given. Freshmen dependence on instructors is also illustrated by two items that differentiate them from seniors. They prefer instructors who are friendly while juniors and seniors do not and freshmen prefer instructors who give individual attention to students while seniors do not express such a strong preference. By contrast, upper class preservice teacher candidates prefer greater freedom and personal responsibility in their learning activities. These attitudes are shown in seniors' preferences for library research, computer assisted instruction, viewing films, having only mid-term and final examinations, and being graded on a peer standard. Seniors' independence is also expressed in their desire to have only a mid-term and final exam and to view instructor friendliness and help after class to be less effective in their learning. They also express a less positive attitude toward fixed grading standards and a more positive attitude toward grading in relation to peers.

It is noteworthy that the five items that make up "Instructor Organization" did not differentiate among the four groups. Previous reserach by Isaacson et. al. (1964) found instructor organization to be a stable factor in student evaluation of college instruction. Mc Keachie, Lin and Mann (1971) did find that "Structure" (their term for instructor organization) tended to be more effective with women than men. They concluded that structured instructors tend to be ineffective for male students. Additional research on gender differences is called for because of this finding.

These findings suggest that younger teacher education students are more dependent on instructors and want greater structure in their courses, while upper class students prefer learning activities that grant them greater freedom and responsibility. These preliminary findings from a cross-sectional design offer the hope that preservice teachers develop stronger preferences for learning activities that require more independence and self discipline as they progress through an undergraduate program. A longitudinal study following the same students would be of great assistance in clarifying findings of the present study.

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